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AUTHOR Faetz, Tyler; Warner, Mary
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development and implementation of a project designed to provide faculty at Western Carolina University (North Carolina) with field experience in public schools. According to the paper, the project focused on team-teaching a high school sophomore so that the professors could learn from the student about the real world of public school English classes. The paper describes what the teaching project, which was rooted in writing instruction for the high school students, was like for a Director of English Education at Western Carolina University and a first-year high school English teacher. The paper discusses the benefits of collaborative strategies and summarizes what has been learned by each teacher. It includes a questionnaire for the students to evaluate the collaborative efforts of the two educators. (NKA)

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An Unbroken Chain of Learning and Teaching

By Tyler Faetz and Mary Warner

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (91st, Baltimore, MD, November 15-20, 2001)

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"An Unbroken Chain of Learning and Teaching"
Tyler Faetz and Mary Warner

Narrative of the Project's Inception (Mary's perspective)

In late autumn 1999, I received information from the College of Education and Allied Professions about the possibility of designing a Public School Project. From the outset, the project was rooted in collaboration; this Incentive Grant is designed to provide faculty in the Arts and Sciences specifically, with field experience in public schools. Because of the strong working relationship at Western Carolina University between Arts and Sciences and Education and Allied Professions, the invitation for Public School Projects was extended, and my proposal led to another level of collaboration: university and high school English teachers.

Having come to Western Carolina University in 1996 in the position of Director of English Education, I had been attempting to increase my knowledge of the English/Language Arts course of study for North Carolina public schools. I wanted direct knowledge of the curriculum that I might better prepare the pre-service teachers in my English methods courses and align their preparation for a smooth transition to the high school English classroom. I was eager to gain firsthand experience of the sophomore World Literature curriculum and the intricacies of teaching writing given the demanding agenda of the 10th Grade Writing Assessment.

My plan evolved; I would team teach a sophomore class twice weekly with a former student and now first-year teacher, Tyler Faetz, at Franklin High School. I had also served as Tyler's academic supervisor during his student teaching semester and had observed firsthand his energy and natural teaching strengths. My intent was to learn from my former student and his students about the real world of public school English classes.

a teaching arena I had left in 1984. Also knowing the challenge first-year teachers face, how many of these beginners lose heart, and something about the attrition rate of teachers in the first five years of teaching, I deliberately selected a first-year teacher as partner in the project.

Thus from the outset I saw the "playing field" as equal, feeling I had a great deal to learn. When first approached with the idea, Tyler felt daunted; he worried that having only had his own classroom for a semester, he didn't have his teaching "act together" and was not entirely sure he wanted his former professor, supervisor, and experienced teacher to share his unfamiliar territory. This insecurity underscored a crucial attitude university faculty need to convey in partnering with colleagues in secondary education. University faculty can not come as savior or as figures of omniscience. Public school teachers need to see that post-secondary educators are authentic in their desire to learn with and from teachers, students and the reality in public schools. I knew, given my university teaching load and student teacher observation schedules, I could only be at Tyler's class two days a week. I was well aware that he had the ultimate responsibility for the class and the burden of preparing his sophomores for the Writing Test; my position was to be a support, a partner in teaching the texts and guiding student writers, and a source for resources unique to the university, which could supplement those available in the public school.

Initial Stages of Collaboration (Tyler's perspective)

I remember well Dr. Warner's (to be referred to as Mary throughout) first email correspondence related to the Public School's Project. She very eloquently articulated her plan for creating a university/secondary education plan that was to begin with a

collaboration between a first-year high school teacher and a university faculty member. Much to my "horror," I discovered that I was the target of her "fiendish" plot to showcase my incompetence by joining forces with me in the teaching of a 10th grade English class. How was I to compete with 25 years of teaching experience both in high school and college? How was I to measure up to all of those wonderful principles of classroom management, innovative instruction, and intuitive pedagogy in Dr. Warner's methods courses for teaching English. "It couldn't be done!" I decried. "I would fail miserably and become the butt of endless faculty jokes." In a pert email response, I simply told Dr. Warner that I was not yet ready for the presence of my former mentor in the classroom. Later that night I received a phone call from Dr. Warner in which she set my mind at ease. She described her intention to limit her role in the classroom to two visits a week and her desire to learn from me about the "real world" of 10th grade readers and writers; these assured me that this project would be a positive experience. Thus the journey began…

As we began the "great experiment, " I quickly discovered that my preconceptions about the collaboration were unfounded. One of my primary concerns about the partnership was the existing traditional mentor/protégé relationship that had been forged between Dr. Warner and me. How could this relationship continue if I needed to be the primary "authority figure" in the classroom? Dr. Warner made it very clear that our previous teacher/student relationship had shifted; in fact Dr. Warner, Mary as she encouraged me to call her, was becoming the student. Instead of a linear relationship where information generally flows from mentor to protégé, we created a cyclical model where information circulated from Mary to Tyler to the students, from the students to

Tyler to Mary. Hence the traditional roles were broken; Mary and I saw ourselves as equal partners, removing the potential problem of subordination. This unbroken cycle served as a unique model of learning for the students as well. Through our relationship, they recognized the importance of equality in the classroom, thus making them better collaborators with one another. This crucial philosophical groundwork was the base from which all practical instruction proceeded.

Benefits of Collaborative Strategies (Tyler and Mary)

We discovered very quickly the potential benefits of our collaboration for our 10th grade students. Because of the constant need for writing reinforcement as a result of the tenth grade writing text, we put our collective skills to good use. One of the techniques we use at Franklin High School to teach writing is a "formula" writing program that stressed the importance of organization and "plugging in" the appropriate factual information and reflective commentary. While this technique serves a sizeable segment of our student population, it is not always as useful for students who already possess reflective writing skills. Because of Mary's expertise in the area of writing instruction, we were able to integrate into the instruction her strategies for advanced thesis formulation, allowing those who were prepared to make the logical transition from a merely workable thesis to an insightful one.

Thus a typical day of instruction might include a review of the formulaic terms of "chunk writing" for helping those students who consistently struggle with developing a detailed, analytical essay, along with more advanced writing guidance utilizing a chapter on thesis Mary had written for a chapter in her recently published book, *Winning Ways of Coaching Writing: A Practical Guide to Teaching Writing Grades 6-12*. As students

practiced these writing skills, the team teaching setting allowed for more one-on-one assistance as students moved from explanation of form to application in their own writing. As the curriculum of 10th grade also involves study of World Literature, which is non-British, non-American, and potentially less accessible to most high school sophomores, each class period had a segment devoted to analyzing the literature about which students would write. Our collaboration again provided a continuous flow of information as Mary could augment Tyler's ideas and he her information.

We also collaborated in conferencing with students about their papers -- an indispensable component of the tenth grade writing environment. More students in every class period were able to be guided and work through revisions; also some of Tyler's grading/responding load was diminished. One of the greatest advantages of two teachers addressing the needs of one group of students in English classes facing end-of-course testing, is precisely such collaboration, which also can be achieved with intern/student teacher and cooperating teacher. As both of us benefited from the division of labor as we answered students' questions and concerns, so team-teaching can be one answer to the stressful pedagogical situation of teachers with end-of-course exams. Many times a student simply needed to have a term re-defined or needed an additional illustration in order to better understand the "direction" of a paper. In some instances, we were able to monitor writing to such a degree that we were able to "sit" with a student and coach her through all the initial stages of pre-writing and essay formation. Particularly on days when students were in the computer writing center, having two teachers facilitated meeting the constant barrage of student inquiries; always this assistance created greater overall student morale.

In addition to the student conferencing we could manage, we also had the welcome advantage of dual monitoring. The 10th grade classroom can be a very noisy and oftentimes chaotic setting. We like to call this sound the "din of idea exchange." However, as often happens, much interaction can fall outside the parameters of this exchange if left unchecked. As a result of the presence of two instructors, students had less of an opportunity to engage in conversation far removed from the objective. Likewise, we were better able to capture the attention of otherwise inattentive students through the constant movement that took place during more traditional "lecture" periods. For example, Tyler could constantly maintain eye contact while defining terms and providing illustrations while Mary highlighted key ideas on the board. Because of the advantage of observing students so carefully, it was much easier to notice expressions of confusion and address the problems immediately.

What I Learned (Mary)

Frequently college writing instructors cringe at the formulaic writing appearing in the form of the five-paragraph essay. Working with Tyler's sophomores who are novices in the structuring of writing and in formulating their ideas to convey a cohesive analysis, I gained support for my theory about the necessity of structure to give writers the freedom to eventually be free of structure. I have used the analogy that beginning writers are like youngsters learning to ride a bike; to successfully ride off without tipping over, the beginner will do things like make sure the pedal is in exactly the right position to ensure optimal balance at take off. Working with 10th graders, I revised that analogy to those beginning to drive. When students are just starting driving, they are particularly careful to adjust the mirrors, glance over their shoulders during lane changes, signal in

advance of turns. The more experienced driver does these actions automatically or possibly ignores them. The point is clear: beginners need structure.

As Tyler taught "chunk writing" and presented the formula of topic sentence followed by concrete detail and then commentary, I found a new language to help my pre-service teachers of writing articulate a pattern that their students as beginning writers could follow. I learned a valuable, albeit formulaic, phrase to use with my college freshmen when I urged them to analyze and "show" their understanding of a concept. The phrase used in the commentary sentence, "this shows that" made sense to me; I was confident it would work as I taught college students and pre-service teachers.

Concurrently I tested some of my ideas about the formulation of thesis statements as I helped Tyler conference with individual students or groups trying to create workable thesis statements in response to practice prompts. I also gleaned concrete reminders of the cognitive abilities of 10th graders; I could see again where they "are" with language usage and the conventions of grammar and mechanics. Though I repeatedly told my students in Fundamentals of Teaching Composition that they had to be prepared for the reality of the writing levels of third, seventh, or tenth graders, now I could be more specific about the realities. Also I gained more credence for my course requirement of the methods students working with writing partners who are in the grades these future teachers will teach.

In North Carolina the sophomore curriculum is World Literature, specifically non-American and non-British. This curriculum change is fairly recent, so in my contacts with in-service teachers and in evaluating what my pre-service teachers needed to know, I was often told "teach them (pre-service teachers) World Literature." In team-

teaching with Tyler, I not only was able to reread texts like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Antigone*, or *Things Fall Apart*, but also I learned ways to integrate popular culture to contextualize these frequently inaccessible texts. Again I watched these 10th graders grapple with unfamiliar cultures and customs and as Tyler made connections from their world to the texts, I discovered new ways to guide my university students, particularly pre-service teachers to the connections.

Obviously there were texts I taught or had studied which could also enrich the 10th grade curriculum. The unit planning that Tyler and I did previous to the semester allowed us to pool our textual experiences. From my background in teaching the Bible as Literature, I could see the logic of teaching the Book of Ruth following a study of *Antigone*. I also had access to the film version of Isak Dinesen's short story, "Babette's Feast." Introducing Tyler and his students to the film allowed them to add another woman writer to their repertoire as well as to provide an "upbeat" text to the world literature curriculum.

What I Learned (Tyler)

In addition to help with writing instruction, Mary was also very helpful in assisting with unit and lesson plan creation. Because of her experience, she was better at seeing "connections" between various works that were not obvious to me at first. For example, I had not taught Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* the first semester I taught 10th grade English. In discussion with Mary, I discovered how much more fulfilling it would be for my female students to have a selection of female heroines to write about. In addition to her support for *A Doll's House*, Mary was also able to suggest other titles such as "Babette's Feast" and excerpts from the *Book of Ruth*. Consequently, Mary offered

some insights on the Bible as literature (a variety of literature rarely approached on the secondary level) and taught a lesson on *The Book of Ruth*. I was humored after the class when she asked me to evaluate her performance. Imagine that! The roles really had changed.

Conversely, I believe I was able to share some ideas with Mary that she would be able to share with her pre-service English students at Western Carolina University. For example, most of my attention-getting devices designed to make literary texts more "real" for my students are rooted in popular culture, and I often make allusions to or provide examples from music, film, and television that help to illustrate a literary theme or idea. I'm betting that Mary has never used former Grateful Dead drummer, Mickey Hart's *Planet Drum* to illustrate the importance that percussion plays in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. I'm also quite certain Mary has not used lyrics from the band, Rage Against the Machine to illustrate the enduring appeal of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience."

Ultimately, I learned a variety of lessons from my fruitful collaboration with Mary. Most importantly, I came to better understand the need for a continued relationship with post-secondary institutions. My preconceptions about the possible "competition" that might result as a consequence of collaboration underscore the fundamental isolation between high school and college. Teachers must come to see their college counterparts as partners in reflection, working toward the same goal -- the continuance of purposeful education. Likewise, college faculty should become more acclimated to the classroom climate of secondary students in order to ensure a smooth transition between the two institutions. It is only through these kinds of collaborative programs that we can truly envision a "community of educators."

And our students said…

Mary prepared a questionnaire for the students to evaluate the collaborative project. We include below the questions and a numbers of student responses. Naturally not every student responded positively. Also, though it was only one semester, Tyler did find that this class earned higher scores on their end-of-course writing test. We aren't ready to make any sweeping claims about the higher test scores related to the team effort, but we are convinced our team teaching offered a much stronger teaching environment.

Questionnaire for Mr. Faetz's/Dr. Warner's Collaboration in English II

1. What was most helpful about having two teachers in the classroom? Explain why.

2. Think about the various work we did to help you prepare for the Writing Test. In what ways did it help to have response from more than one teacher?

3. In several classes, while Mr. Faetz was presenting material, Dr. Warner was writing key ideas at the board. How did this team-teaching technique (and others of which you might be aware) help you learn better?

4. Dr. Warner is a faculty member in the English dept. at Western Carolina University. How has having a college professor in your class been positive or negative? Explain why.

5. Since Dr. Warner has access to resources from WCU, we were able to have the Oprah conversation with Elie Wiesel, "Babette's Feast," and other background materials for both the literature you've studied and the writing skills we developed. Comment on the advantage of having such resources.

6. Dr. Warner did some specific teaching: the Thesis Handout, the Book of Ruth… Comment on her teaching--was it understandable? Was it valuable? What did you like or not like?

Share anything else you'd like to say.

(Below are the comments in the actual words of the 10th grade students. Since we did not ask for names, we do not cite specific writers of these words.)

- "She knew what was expected in a college classroom and could use a similar teaching technique with us…It gets you used to how things work in a college classroom"
- "If you couldn't fully understand one, the other was there to help out."
- "It made learning more advanced having college things used along with high school level things."
- [what was most helpful about having two teachers in the classroom] "having more than one point of view about different subjects"
- "I do think that they made a great teaching team"
- "It's been positive because you have someone that teaches a higher level of English and it makes you feel smarter. It's been negative because I feel like I have to be smarter in order to be in the class."

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